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ABSTRACT

The meanings of "evaluation" and "decisioning" are examined and the function, form, and content of educational evaluation are set forth. Philosophical questions which emerge from epistemology, logic, axiology, ethics, social philosophy, ontology, and metaphysics concerning the nature of people are briefly described. In order to address questions in any given area of philosophy, assumptions must be made about other areas. Persons-in-practice make assumptions which differ from those of other persons-in-practice. It is useful for educational evaluators to be able to sort through differing assumptions in order to develop clear descriptions. (Author/RC)

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What Philosophic Questions for Educational Evaluators?

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Introduction

This paper emerges from my experiences as an evaluator in education and the definitions, roles, and function of educational evaluation which I accept. The purpose of this paper is to set forth a case for educational evaluators coming to perceive what the major problems are in onthology, ethics, social philosophy, axiology, and meta-physics concerning the nature of people.

The case presented here has the following format. First, the nature of educational evaluation is briefly described and is distinguished from decision making; a distinction which parallels a common organizational pattern in education. Second, the primary philosophical focus for educational evaluators is found in fields of epistemology, logic and axiology. Third, in order to make meaningful and rational statements of knowledge, inquiry, and value, one must also make assumptions about reality, ethics and social philosophy, and metaphysics concerning the nature of people. Further, unexamined assumptions lead an educational evaluator to incorrectly understand the phenomenon evaluated. Fifth, and finally, educational evaluators deal with persons who are engaged in common endeavors and also bring vastly different assumptions to bear.

The nature of evaluation

The term 'evaluation' has multiple meanings, three important meanings are:

a) The judgement of worth of a thing.(1)

b) The collection and interpretation of data.

c) The collection and interpretation of data prior to making a decision.

The first meaning leaves out method of evaluation unless one adds qualifiers. It confounds the meanings of 'valuation' and 'judging'; i.e.d. the assignment of worth and the forming of an authoritative opinion. Its synonyms are: judgement, appraisal, rating, or interpretation. When an administrator, school board member, teacher or parent says "X will be evaluated.", he or she usually means that at some

future point the question, "Was X worthwhile?", will be answered.

The second meaning emerges from the practice of sending out questionnaires of the form "Was X worthwhile?" or from gathering data about which there are unquestioned assumptions about what is good or desirable (e.g. The current measurements carried out by the National Assessment of Educational Progress or the frequent measurement of Gross National Product). This meaning often confounds questions of fact with questions of value and good.

The third meaning emerges from relatively recent work in evaluation[2] which attempts to generate options for action given certain prior values (which for the interim are accepted) and certain data and information. The problem with this definition is that it makes evaluation equal to <u>not</u> judging the worth of a thing. Understandably, few practicing educators accept or understand the last meaning.

I hold that evaluation is concerned primarily with questions of value as they relate to questions of fact. I hold, further, that the end result of evaluation is a judgement (or decision) just as the end product of a fall is a collision with the ground.[3]

The root of 'to decide' is to cut off in the sense of ending uncertainty or contention or arriving at a choice or solution. Another sense is to infer or conclude from evidence. However, I have observed that contention is rarely ended upon the making of a decision and that most decisions are routinely reconsidered either upon the acquisition of new evidence or discomfort with the outcomes of a prior decision. Therefore, I conceptualize decisions as intermittent points in a stream of events. One may, for example, describe the course of an educational program as a sequence of decisions, each one marking some potential turning point. In addition, I take 'deciding' as an act of will which answers a question.

Evaluation-decision encompasses both the ordinary sense of 'making a judgement' and the technical sense of 'providing information for a decision-maker'. The evaluator and the decision-maker are either the same or different people; in the latter case the focus is on gathering and interpreting data and providing alternatives. Evaluation-decision has two important referents, a) the mental or psychic act of coming to and then deciding and b) the complex interactions of people in organizations. Both 'evaluation-' and '-decision' and 'evaluation-decision' may be done adequately or not, rationally or not, effectively or not, and be good or not. In what follows 'judgement' and 'decision' will be used interchangeably.

Another way of saying what is the nature of evaluation is to describe its function, content, and form.(5) Since such a description is not the primary purpose of this paper, a brief version will have to do.

The function of evaluation is to lead to judgements of worth.(6) Good evaluation is that which itself conforms to adequate ethical and moral codes and leads to good judgements of worth. Effective evaluation is evaluation which leads to judgements of worth; i.e.d. a fulfillment of evaluation's purpose. Assuming that judgements of worth affect the future course of events as well as being confirmed or not, effective judgements are those which are confirmed and whose affects are as predicted.

The content of evaluation is dictated by the requirements for a judgement. A judgement is impossible if there is nothing serving as information, although the information may be pure fantasy. A judgement is impossible where there is nothing serving as criterion, e.g. a decision-rule of the form 'If so much of X, then decision A is warranted'. A decision is impossible if there are no values assigned to components of the thing examined, that is the case where ((The value of A) - (The value of B)) = 0.(7)

Another part of the content of evaluation is a set of options (or potential decisions) and a forecast of the results of making one or some combination of the available judgements. The list of options is the result of a synthesis which generates some possible action. Forecasts are necessary because it is absurd to make a decision without at least guessing about the probable outcomes of the decision.

The form of evaluation starts with a decision-to-be-made and proceeds to explicate values, delineate decision-rules, and collect information. These then are synthesized into options which are then analyzed into forecasts. The end result is judgement. The form is a series of nested relationships among the content of evaluation. That is, the relationship Explication is applied to the variable values, the relationship Delineation to the variable decision rules and the relationship Collected to the variable information (e.g. data). These are then related by Synthesis such that options result. Analysis is the relationship which yields forcasts. Thereupon, a judgement is made. In symbols:

$$(A(S(Ev \;\&\; Dr \;\&\; Ci) \text{ --- options}) \text{ --- forecasts}) - \text{Judgement}$$

Evaluation - Decision is iterative with respect to both time and the decision to be made.

Epistemology, logic and axiology

There is little controversy that epistemology and logic are appropriate for the preparation of educational evaluators. To the extent that educational evaluation consists of the doings of activities which are also performed by researchers and inquirers, then questions of logic and epistemology have direct bearing on the skill an evaluator brings to his or her tasks. I have in mind things like formulating research questions, developing theory verification designs, using statistics, and developing well constructed arguments.

Furthermore, an educational evaluator who cannot make elementary sorts of belief, knowledge, faith, opinion, truth, and evidence can hardly be applying her or his techniques in any more than a cookbook fashion. This is not to say that epistemology is necessary for an effective evaluator. For example, if the value[8] of each variable is available and the relationships are expressed as algorithms, then a computer can perform the evaluation and often the resulting decision. It hardly needs to be said that the value of variables and the existence of algorithms for relationships are usually murky and require substantial human intuition. Learned intuitions about what is being said and where the truth is likely to lie are, in my opinion, useful for educational evaluators.

The case for educational evaluators addressing questions of axiology is less clear due to its history. Educational evaluation has emerged from educational theory verification and has carried with it the notion that values are givens or postulates whose formation is outside the domain of evaluation itself. In simplistic form, this account of evaluation is 'if value plus data then judgement', essentially reducing evaluation to epistemology and logic. There is more than that to evaluation.

An evaluator who fails to examine the reliability and validity of the collected information is making a serious mistake. By analogy, an evaluator who fails to examine the stability and applicability of the values used in the evaluation is making an equally serious mistake. And this merely addresses the question of whether there is some timeless congruence between the set of values and the set of data.

The content of the values must be examined. In the first place the value may express a quality of evilness or goodness, such qualities will be carried over to the judgement. In the second place some values may be meta-values governing the

applicability of other values. Third, the statement of values are often semantically unclear. Fourth, values have limits which must be considered.(9) Fifth, the values may conflict which must be addressed. It is possible for two or more values to cancel each other out and hence render subsequent judgements meaningless.(10)

The question of personal morality and values of the educational evaluator will be addressed below.

Reality, ethics, social philosophy, and the nature of people

The fundamental argument of this section is that meaningful epistemological statements, well constructed theory verification designs, and well explicated values cannot happen without making assumptions or taking stands about reality, ethics, social philosophy, and the nature of people. One cannot make a derivation in epistemology without including epistemological premises. One also cannot start with only premises in logic and arrive at epistemological conclusions. Therefore assumptions rather than derivation are required to link logic and epistemology. Logic is the function, content and form of thought while epistemology is the function, content and form of knowledge and belief. They link through an assumption that 'truth' which is preserved in logic is the same 'truth' that differentiates knowledge from belief.

Further, the discussion on knowledge and belief (that is, epistemology) would be idle were a logic of thought (usually expressed as statements in a language) not assumed to exist and to be an appropriate tool for such discourse. Similarly, logic would be idle were there not true statements available. This pattern of necessary mutual assumptions exists also between other branches of philosophy.

Suppose that one believes that "'P' is true if and only if P", then the believer has

made an ontological assumption about the existence of P. 'Grass is green' is true if and only if grass is green. The underlined part of the previous sentence has in it 'grass is', an ontological claim.(11)

Where judgements are to be made axiological assumptions have been made. Two notable ones are that the components of the thing judged do have value and that judging is better than flipping a coin. In the sense of 'to cut-off' both procedures may work; and surely judging is more highly valued than coin-flipping. If truth were not valued than logical systems might as well be chosen on the basis of the beauty of their arcane runes, which itself (beauty) is a value. If communication is valued then intersubjective knowledge is better than private knowledge.

In order to make an epistemological claim an ontological assumption has been made. What has no existence cannot be studied. There are varieties of existence; physical, psychic, and spiritual to name a few. This is not to say that the existence of the thing itself depends upon its being studied or believed in. Rather, names exist and things exist. The name, 'tree,' did not cause the thing, tree. Nor did the thing cause the name. One is in a world of physical things the other in the world of names. For example, one view of physical reality is that to be real something must be locatable in space-time. If so what of the electron, is it 'almost' real?

Ethics as the set of principles about personal action and social philosophy as the set of principles about social action are also required if one is to make epistemological claims. I do not mean this or that particular set must be chosen but that some set must be chosen. For example, a dishonest epistemologist supports an impossible contradiction, similar to the case which would exist if Plato lies to us after he returns to the cave.

And for philosophical inquiry to exist at all, and I assume it does, one must assume that the nature of people is such that at least some of us are capable of engaging in the rational discourse.

The necessary assumptions set forth above are not assumptions within each domain of discourse but rather assumptions which allow the discourse to take place. Stated another way, epistemology is not about logic, ethics, values, ontology, and metaphysics and hence don't talk about them. But, epistemology cannot proceed unless similar assumptions are made about the context of epistemological discourse itself. If the epistemological discourse is ever to apply to anything but pure fantasy, then ontological, ethical, axiological, logical, and metaphysical assumptions must be made in the domain to which the epistemology refers.

Why examine assumptions?

Examination of an assumption is the conscious thinking about the assumption to determine if it applies to the situation and, if it does, to estimate its apparent truth. AND, suppressed assumptions can be uncovered by examination.

Unexamined assumptions lead to a restricted set of hypotheses about the phenomenon under study. For example, Skinnerian psychology equates intersubjectivity with intersubjective observation of an individual's behavior and her/his environment, therefore, the allowable testable hypotheses are those which relate behavior and environment. Hypotheses about intangibles (say cognitive dissonance) are not allowable without translation into the behavior-environment domain. Of course, whole categories of assumption, may not be relevant; and unexamined assumptions are of unknown relevance.

Unexamined assumptions may lead to erroneous conclusions. For example, the wrong t-test may be chosen if the assumption of independence of sample means is unexamined.

Examined assumptions may reveal the bases of others' perceptions. People will perceive others differently if they assume that the other is basically aggressive as opposed to non-aggressive. If it is assumed that behavior is a symptom of an inner something or that behavior is the thing itself then different perceptions will result.

Philosophical questions for evaluators

Educational evaluators may carry the title of 'evaluator' or may not. The questions below are appropriate for those persons who practice educational evaluation whether or not it is included in their job title.(12) The model at focus is where the evaluator and decision-maker are different persons. Three broad categories may be delineated depending on the degree to which the evaluator is responsible for doing the evaluation.

The first is where an educational evaluator is to make a judgement of the worth or quality of an educational program.(13) Typically, but not always, the evaluator seeks to ascertain the goals and objectives of the program, seeks to gather data describing the processes and outcomes of the program, ascertains what value is attached to various components, and develops criteria upon which the quality judgement can be based. The second is where the evaluator works jointly with another person charged with the responsibility for making the judgement of worth of the program. The task here is frequently debased to that of merely collecting data. The decision-maker may be in charge of an ongoing program, a program in the process of development, or herself an external judge. The third case is where the evaluator consults with another person concerned with installing, inventing, or operating an evaluation-decision mechanism in a program.

Whether or not the evaluator is directly responsible for doing the evaluation, the following evaluation questions are posed.

1. What are the goals of the program?
2. What is the history or antecedents of the program?
3. What is the program's description?
4. What are the program's outcomes?
5. To what extent were the outcomes congruent with goals?

In addition, most evaluations do not restrict themselves to using goals as the only applicable value. Further questions asked are:

7. Is the program's description congruent with what was planned?
8. Are there other realized values?
9. What other criteria exist?

Then,

10. What options exist about:
    a) judgements of worth?
    b) decisions about the program's form, content, or function?
11. What are the probable outcomes of each of these decisions?

In addition the following philosophic questions should be addressed.

A. Are the goals and values intrinsically good or bad? Similarly are the program's procedures intrinsically good or bad?

This raises the ethical question for the evaluator. For example, should an evaluator have a role in evaluating a program whose goal is to teach women and children to be subservient to male authority if the evaluator also supports the equal rights amendment?

B. Are the goals trivial or significant?

For example, a program may have the goal of improving the elegance of a state reporting form which provides information to the legislature on the heights

of window sills above the floor. In this event the role of the evaluator may be to suggest that more significant goals are waiting to be addressed. An evaluator who fails to question the significance of the goals fails to provide the most appropriate questions and information to the decision-maker.

C. Is the set of values an appropriate set?

A board of education determined to save money values low-cost programs. Yet law and morality may dictate that a program be provided no-matter what its cost. The evaluator should ascertain whether there are competing and perhaps compelling values which are more appropriate and be able to demonstrate the compelling nature of alternative values.

D. Are the values chosen mindlessly?

The recent controversy over hair length in schools is, I think, a good example of both a mindlessly chosen value and confounding of authority and authoritarianism. Many current ideologies confuse what <u>should be</u> good with what <u>is</u> good - another example of mindless values.(14)

E. Is the ethics of an evaluator an adequate set?

Ethical conflicts abound when examining educational programs. An evaluator may uncover bad educational programs after pledging that his data will be confidential.

F. Is the ethics and social philosophy of the program being evaluated adequate?

An evaluator needs an understanding of means as opposed to ends and some skill in making judgements about when ends do not justify means. And some understanding of intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic good. For example, an evaluator may encounter a program where autistic children are shocked with cattle prods to stop autistic behavior so they will attend to appropriate reinforcers. A more common situation is where compliance is rewarded at the expense of learning.

G. What ontological framework is being used by people in the program?(15)

Southwest Native Americans employ a different set of assumptions about time and space than do Anglo's. If Piaget's notions are correct the reality in which small children operate is different than adults. We hold that appearances are not the reality and we teach that when we teach the roundness of the earth as opposed to its apparent flatness. Some of us teach that some things are real which have no appearancees - e.g. God. All people, I think, continually confuse reality with appearance or at least reconstruct their concepts of reality from appearances. People in organizations face different appearances depending on their special task with the organization. Having little acquaintance with the appearances faced by others in the organization they have little data enabling them to reconstruct the appearances of the other person and hence the reality of the other person. An educational evaluator who entertains hypotheses that different people within the organization operate from different reality constructions can obtain a clearer picture of the educational program and frequently can provide an alternative reality reconstruction which takes both viewpoints into account.

H. What are the basic assumptions about people used by the evaluator?

A behaviorist may have little time for freedom and dignity and concern him or herself only with exhibited behavior on the grounds that people are essentially like black boxes. A Freudian may see Oedipal conflicts and oral compulsions. A social Darwinist may see struggle for survival in a sixth grade classroom. An evaluator who does not understand these multiple assumptions imposes his or her own upon the situation and moreover is unable to repair to a position that is none of these but which serves as a vantage point from which to describe what is happening.

I. Similar to H., what are the basic assumptions about people that people in the program being evaluated employ?

When gathering data and information the evaluator encounters substantially different interpretations of common experiences. Some of these differences are explained by the basic assumptions about the nature of people used by the interviewee. A common route is where another's motivation and real intent is deduced using assumptions about the nature of people.

Conclusion

At the end I think I should summarize why I think the questions above are philosophical rather than evaluative questions. They are philosophical because they employ the strategy of the philosopher as well as being directly concerned with philosophical matters. The strategy is to examine available information as if it were a logical argument and to find the assumptions which are necessary to make what is said true or valid. This then generates a set of hypotheses for further consideration which the evaluator, not the philosopher, sets about finding evidence for or against. Well done courses in philosophy engage the students in philosophical discourse where the skill of asking "What must be if this thing is to be?" can be practiced and improved.

Notes

1. Webster's Third New International Dictionary. Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam. 1967.

2. Stufflebeam, D. L. et al. Educational evaluation and decision making. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock. 1971.

3. Cautiously extending the analogy to free fall probably describes fruitless evaluations.

4. Of course, one can make the decision to continue straight on, hence the use of the adjective 'potential'.

5. Maccia, E. S. On the contribution of logic to educational science. Paper presented to The International Congress, International Association for the Advancement of Educational Research, University of Paris, September, 1973.

6. It is important to note that explicit judgements of worth are frequently suppressed within decisions for action, e.g., decisions to hire or fire personnel, to buy or not buy materiel, or to implement some particular course of action.

7. In slang we might say, "...six of one an'a half a dozen of the other..."

8. In the mathematical sense of '...the value of x is 5'.

9. I have in mind the example where freedom is valued. Yet freedom cannot extend everywhere, it is itself bounded. Hence, one of the limits of freedom is its own unfreeness.

10. Analagous to the argument in logic which contains the premise 'P and not -P', hence making any randomly chosen conclusion valid but non-sensical.

11. The point is also made if one says, "...grass is a sharp-edged angiosperm...".

12. This specifically includes administrators and teachers responsible for carrying out educational programs. The account of educational evaluation-educational-decisioning presented here entails they be considered evaluators. Never-the-less, those whose specialty is evaluation have more responsibility to be aware of these questions just as those who are decision-makers have more responsibility for the outcomes of the decisions.

13. An educational program consists of at least one person perfoiming goal directed activities within an organization with at least one teaching-learning component. Both the person and the organization are in a context.

14. I have a number of politically radical friends who compare the current performance of the United States to some unrealized ideal while collecting food stamps. And there are those who bemoan the radical's lack of patriotism while on the way to the mailbox to deposit money in secret Bahamanian bank accounts.

15. The notion of alternative realities is from Pearce, J. C. The crack in the cosmic egg. New York: The Julian Press, 1971. From there as well as philosophy courses I got the strategy of making explicit assumptions which have been suppressed.

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